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Women as Migrants: Challenges and Opportunities

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Migration can be both a cause and a consequence of female empowerment.

~ Graeme Hugo
(Hugo 2000)

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, women have accounted for almost half of the total population of immigrants (Zlotnick 2003). But, despite of the substantial contribution of women migrants, there is a lack of sex-disaggregated data in analysis of migrants and related policies. Gender based migrant studies were initiated in the 1980's but a new study suggests that instead of increasing the literature in this field, from 1990 to 2010, the number of countries providing sex segregated data has actually lessened (Hovy 2013).

Research in migration is often done with respect to economic cost benefit analysis but it is important to understand that when researching female migration, an analysis of the gender roles and the social implications of these norms in various cultures is quite crucial in developing a fair understanding of the issue. Assuming gender to be a social construct, the terms “male” and “female” have a huge influence on the roles, behaviours and expectations adjoined to the terms of masculinity and femininity. A gender wise study of the issue can highlight a fresh perspective on gender relations, role of gender in accessibility of resources and opportunities as well as the balance of power between the genders in legal, social and economic structures.

Migration can be a powerful tool for women, it provides them with access to education and

employment, improving skewed gender equations and strengthening their agency by helping them develop decision making abilities. But on the other hand, migration also exposes, especially women to violent gender abuses such as trafficking and slavery, particularly when they're unskilled or irregular. An in depth understanding of the intersectionality between gender and migration is necessary in order to frame better policies and safeguards for women migrants so that their access to opportunity and independence is increased while restricting the vulnerabilities that they're exposed to.

2. SCOPE

Even though it is important to study gender in migration as a whole since gender includes both men and women, this paper will focus only on women migrants. Even in case of migration in women, there are two scenarios: voluntary and forced migration. This paper will only deal with voluntary migration of women and naturally a study of forced migration will involve additional points of consideration. The direction of the paper is such because there is an alarming dearth in literature which focuses solely on women in migration and this paper will cover the opportunities and costs that are created for women by migration, the restrictions and vulnerabilities that they are exposed to and will try to answer the question "Whether on a whole migration of women is a catalyst for their empowerment and independence?" The methodology of research would be a fine blend between empirical and qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources and in addition to answering the above-mentioned question, the paper will also provide a few policy recommendations that would make migration for women a safer and more viable option.

3. COST AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FEMALE MIGRANTS

3.1. REMITTANCES

Remittance can be generally defined as that part of a migrant's earning that s/he sends home to support their family members. According to a report by UN Women, women are the primary beneficiaries of remittances irrespective of the gender of the remitter (Petroziello 2013). In fact, it was found that this is the case through the length and breadth of Latin America and with women

in Brazil and Ecuador especially consisting of two thirds of the beneficiaries (IDB-MIF 2003 and IDB-MIF 2004).

Autonomy of women increase with remittances. It was seen that in the Philippines, the women who received remittances from female remitters saw a marked shift from subsistence agriculture to small scale businesses (IOM 2012). It was also discovered that in some cases, receiving of remittances, substantially increased the probability of women ownership of businesses (Acosta 2007).

Women migrant send home significant amounts by way of remittances. It was found that migrant women were more prone to be unskilled, semi-skilled or temporary as compared to men and also that migrants who were temporary or less skilled tended to send home more money by way of remittances than migrants who were highly skilled (Ramamurthy 2003 and Piper 2005). As per the IOM, of the 1 billion USD that was remitted to Sri Lanka in 1999, almost 62 percent of it was remitted by women migrants (IOM 2003, as cited by Afsar 2011) and also 57 percent of Bolivian women who were living in Spain, contributed to almost 73 percent of the remittances sent home (More et al. 2008, as cited by Deere et al. 2015).

Remittances amount fluctuate based on role in family and country of origin. Studies have found that in most of Latin American and African countries, men are the majority migraters and women consisting of only 44 percent and 17 percent of the total migrating population (Orozco 2007 and Deere et al. 2015). Therefore, it is natural that in these countries' women would be less likely to contribute significantly through remittances. In some studies, it has also been found that gender and sibling order also play a role in remittances. For e.g. In Thailand, sons and daughters both are likely to migrate but middle daughter is more prone to sending remittances as they, more than other siblings have to earn the support of parents for inheritance purposes (Curran 1996, 1995, as cited by Curran and Saguy 2001). Although, in countries' like Kenya, it was the sons who were more likely to remit than daughters with respect to who would inherit the parental assets (Hoddinott 1994, as cited by Guzman et al. 2008).

Gender roles and expectations play a significant role in remittances and their quantity. In a survey it was found that some families prefer their daughters to migrate as they feel that daughters

are more likely to remit as compared to sons (Petrozziello 2013). In South Asia, it was discovered that unmarried women migrate almost exclusively with the intention to remit and support their parents (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and UNFPA 2002, as cited by Martin 2004). Evidence also suggests that between women and men, it is found that men tend to remit to a more concentrated group of family members than women and men's wives were last to receive support and it was less than 20 percent of the amount remitted. But women no matter who they have to support would always remit first to their husbands and then to anyone else (Piper 2005).

Generally, women tend to remit a greater percentage than men (UNFPA 2006 and UNDP 2009). Accordingly, it was seen that in Spain, migrant women residing there remitted 38.5 percent of their incomes in contrast to men who remitted only 14.5 percent (More et al. 2008, as cited by Deere et al. 2015). Afsar found that in all of South Asia, migrant women remitted a greater percentage of their earnings than men (Afsar 2006). Bangladeshi women employed in the Gulf countries would remit 58 percent as compared to the 45 percent of the men. Although there is difference in the remittances between married and single women and as a rule it is found that married women remit less than single women which could be attributable to the family relation and the gender role of the migrant with her family.

In the stability and frequency of remittances sent home, women are more reliable than men (Deere et al. 2015). A study by More et al. also confirmed that of the Bolivian migrants in Spain, women sent home remittances 9.5 times every year as compared to the 8.8 times of the men. Even in Thailand women who are more likely to work in low wage jobs like secretarial positions, service sectors or the manufacturing area of exports processing regions, which are more stable than the jobs of men who tend to work in agriculture or construction work. Due to this difference in stability, women are able to remit more frequently than men but less than men as there is a pay gap in their professions (Curran and Saguy 2001).

Women sending remittances has been linked to an increase/improvement in family welfare. A study has directly linked an increase in income through remittances to an increase in investment in health and education of children. So when a woman's income increases by way of remittances, she is more likely to invest the extra capital in the education and health care of her children (Taylor

and Martin 2001). In a study by Ratha it was similarly observed that when women receive remittance, there was seen an increase in the health and education of the family's children whereas when men receive remittance, they were observed to be more likely to acquire assets (Ratha 2005 and Afsar 2006).

Remittance of women migrant has been shown to improve family welfare. In a study conducted in Uttar Pradesh, India, it was discovered that almost 86 percent of migrant women who were employed in industrial work had reported an improvement in the education of their children, 84 percent admitted that quality and frequency of food consumption had improved for them and 51 percent reported that working and earning had made better health care facilities accessible to them (UNDP-TAHA 2007, as cited by Deshingker and Atker 2009). As normal Asian women were seen to use their new found decision making power due to their increased earning capacity to invest in family welfare, health care and education (Afsar 2011). It was also observed in some countries like the Dominican Republic, the Honduras and Guatemala that when men receivers did not use the remittance in the way they were asked to, women remitters were compelled to change the recipient to females while also providing instructions for the use of the money remitted (Garcia and Paiewonsky 2006, Petrozziello 2011 and Moran-Taylor 2008).

Some studies have also shown that when women remit money, education improves, especially for girls. A study undertaken in The Republic of Congo showed very clearly that remittances played a role in the attainment of education for children (Gonzalez-Konig and Wodon 2007). In Ecuador it was seen that households receiving remittances showed on an average an increase of 2.6 percent in girls getting educated which in the case of rural girls was even higher (Calero et al. 2009, as cited by Deere et al. 2015). A study in Pakistan finds that when parents migrate temporarily for work in Pakistan, education of girls increase by almost 54 percent whereas there is only a 7 percent increase in education for boys. But not only was an increase seen in education, the dropout rates of both girls and boys were seen to fall by 55 and 44 percent respectively (Mansuri 2006a and Mansuri 2006b). The study also showed that when migrant households were compared to non-migrant households, girls from migrant households were seen to complete 1.5 years more years of education as compared to girls from non-migrant households.

3.2. IMPROVED CONDITIONS FOR WOMEN IN THEIR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Migration has been found to be empowering for women. Although empowerment of women depends on a host of factors, it was seen that when women migrated alone, through the legal channels, worked in the formal sector and resided in the country of destination for a long-time empowerment was more likely (Piper 2005). Migration has been seen to directly improve self-esteem, confidence, decision making power and human capital when the earning capacity of women are increased. A lot of families prefer their daughter to migrate as they are seen more reliable and there is a new found respect for the females in their families due to their financial contributions (Temin et al. 2013). This study also showed that when migrant adolescent girls were compared to their rural counterparts, they showed an increases in education levels partly due to their proximity to schools in destination cities.

Introduction to liberal societal conditions lead to an improvement in women's autonomy, rights and access to resources (Martin 2004). It was found that when women migrate to countries which have less or low levels sex discriminatory policies and institutions with respect to the origin countries, a change was seen for the better for these women back in their origin countries with respect to their agency and autonomy whereas when the migrated to countries with high level of sex discriminatory policies an opposite effect was seen in their origin countries (Ferrant and Tuccio 2015a). Accordingly, migration can show a shift from traditional practices with respect to girls and their autonomy and it also shows the adoption of new fairer norms with respect to their education or age of marriage (Martin 2004 and UNFPA 2006).

Migrant women, when they return home, retain their newly discovered autonomy and agency while also bringing their skills and expertise to their home country. Migration has seen to introduce women to new skills and encourage them to start their own business when back (Petrozziello 2013). An UN-INSTRAW study of the women of the Dominican Republic returning from Spain showed a 100 percent increases in starting their own businesses (UNFPA 2006). A Sri Lankan study showed that migrant women were more likely to start small businesses than other women and they showed that 48 percent of migrant households had businesses run by women as compared to 37 percent of non-migrant households (Shaw 2005a).

3.3. OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN WHO STAY BACK AT HOME

Even when women remain at home, migration has seen to improve gender equality and agency of women. It is seen even when men migrate alone, women tend to have greater authority and decision-making power of their household. Women tend to become the decision maker for a lot of issues such as children's education, land and health care facilities, it increases their autonomy, helps them develop decision making skills and managing family finances. This finding has been supported by numerous studies (Afsar 2011; Martin 2004; Gammage 2004, Fadloulah, Berrada and Khachani 2000). According to Chant, women who remained at home in Indonesia, Costa Rica and Kenya found greater autonomy irrespective of the type of migration by males of the family (Ghosh 2009). Even in India, women from Kerala whose husbands had emigrated for work found more independence and control over their households with 70 percent of them opening bank accounts, 40 percent of them generating income and more than 50 percent of them becoming owners of their houses or land (Zachariah, Prakash, and Irudaya Rajan 2002). In Peru, women were found unwilling to relinquish this new independence and authority when their husbands returned home and as a result the area saw a lot of divorces and separations (Deere 1978).

4. RESTRICTIONS THAT LIMIT

OPPORTUNITIES FOR MIGRATING WOMEN

4.1. DEBILITATING GENDER ROLES

In patriarchal societies, women's agency and authority are curtailed by society and family. A study done in Niger showed that societal norms of the place dictated that good women did not leave their homes and that women neither worked nor migrated (World Bank 2014). A multivariate study conducted in countries of central America showed that in patriarchal societies such as in Mexico and Costa Rica showed low rates of women migration especially for married women whereas matrifocal societies showed higher rates of migrating women with the women exceeding the number of men who migrated (Massey et al. 2006).

In patriarchal societies, women of the household faced greater restrictions and found it more difficult to access resources (Ghosh 2009). It was seen that women in patriarchal societies had

no power to decide the use of the remittances that they received. A study conducted in the slums of Nairobi among other places like Philippines, women were subjected to heavy supervision and control by their spouses on their use of the remittances by way of frequent visits, calls and budget allocations. In some cases, to ensure compliance the beneficiary of the remittance was changed to other family members as a way to exercise control over the wife and her behaviour. This in turn changed and affected the use of remittance by spouses (Yang 2009). In many households, women are forbidden from working or stepping outside the house for employment and this makes the household entirely reliant on the remittance and causes great hardships if the remittance were to cease. Even in Punjab, the households that received remittance saw greater demands in dowry, less or no gainful employment and higher percentage of isolation for wives and daughters (Afsar 2011).

4.2. DISCRIMINATION, UNDER EMPLOYMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT OF MIGRANT WOMEN

Migrant women show higher rates of unemployment as compared to local women or migrant men. It was observed that migrant women from non-OECD countries had greater unemployment numbers than women from OECD countries with as many as 60 percent of migrant women aged between 15 to 64 had a job in 2004 (Ghosh 2009). Similarly, in 2003 migrant women from North Africa and Turkey had the lowest employment rates of a mere 25 and 31 percent respectively which was way lesser than the migrant men or the local women as reported by the European Commission in 2004 (European Commission 2004). It was also found that women who migrate but do not get employment, either for lack of work, or societal and gender restrictions or who have migrated just to be reunited with their family tend to face more difficulty in learning the local language and making social connections in the country of destination (Munz et al. 2006).

Women with high skill levels often find themselves underemployed or working in jobs for which they are over qualified (Ghosh 2009). In New Zealand, migrants from India and China who have various professional qualifications and degrees which are higher than the national average often find themselves unemployed or paid less than the locals and men migrants (Ministry of Health 2006). Even in Chile, almost 70 percent of the Peruvian migrant women working in domestic service positions have been found to have completed high school education and have

university degrees (Ortega 2001).

4.3. RESTRICTIONS IMPOSED BY LAW IN MOBILITY AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

Legal restrictions restrict women more than men in migration (UNFPA and IMP 2004). It was studied that in many countries the mobility of married women has been legally restricted. In as many as 30 countries married woman do not have the freedom to choose where they wish to live (World Bank Group 2015). The same study also observed that 19 countries if not more, legally require women to obey their husbands. In many countries such as the Islamic Republic of Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Qatar and Sudan women require permission from their husbands or nearest male kin in order to travel even if they have a passport. Even in Syria, men can restrict their wives from travelling by having their names registered with the Ministry of Interior (World Bank Group 2015). The same study also noted that at that time there were 18 countries that legally restricted married woman from working without their partner's assent. The advent of these laws can be traced back to older colonial codes like the Napoleonic code or the country's guardianship laws. In addition to this some countries' immigration laws also restrict married women's legal status without their partner's support which can go a long way in reinforcing traditional gender roles.

4.4. ADDITIONAL VULNERABILITIES FACED BY MIGRANT WOMEN

Migrant women find themselves increasingly dependant on recruitment agencies because of a lack of access to resources and information. Recruitment agencies are lucrative businesses as can be seen by the fact that Filipino agencies gross more than 400 million USD each year (Martin, Abella, and Midgley 2004). These agencies charge sky high prices and as women in general are paid less than men, they face greater difficulty in paying off their accrued debt as compared to men and which therefore effectively reduces their economic gain (Ghosh 2009). The same study also found that irregular migrant women are at a greater risk of facing abuse and sexual exploitation by the agents and escorts which can also lead them being led into trafficking. An Amnesty International report stated that almost 60 percent of Indonesian women had their personal documents like identity cards, birth certificates, marriage certificates withheld by the

recruitment agencies if they wish to withdraw from migration until they paid almost 1720 USD. This in resulted them into accepting job offers at terms which were very different from the ones originally discussed (Amnesty International 2013). The same study also found that almost 92 percent of the workers surveyed complained of being detained in the agencies during training where they had to go through verbal abuse, forced haircuts, threats and lack of food. Only 7 percent of them received signed contracts whereas almost 30 percent of them did not even get an overseas worker's card.

Employment laws do not generally cover domestic service. Female migrant domestic workers are hidden from the public eye, are more at risk of facing abuse and are less able to interact socially which makes it easier to exploit them since they have little to no knowledge of their rights and have no opportunity to create or join unions. These women tend to desist from using the resources at their disposal because of the fear of deportation, more abuse or the fear of losing they employment (Min-Harris 2008). In the year 2000 alone, some 19000 domestic workers ran away from their employers in Saudi Arabia due to abuse, lack of rest hours, irregular or reduced wages, violence among others and in some cases abuse against migrants have also resulted in their deaths (UNFPA 2006).

Female migrants have been forced to sell their bodies or sell sexual favours in order to survive and provide for their children especially in cases where they are displaced (Ghosh 2009). Migrant women in general have been found to be exceptionally vulnerable to sexual exploitation (Crush and Ramachandran 2009). One ILO report has found that one in six irregular female migrants have been coerced into sex especially when they're employed in the entertainment and domestic sectors (ILO 2004). Paid or forced sex work put migrant women at greater risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV AIDS which can also make them suffer backlash in their country of origin from their family and community. A UN report stated that in France, 69 percent of the people diagnosed with HIV/AIDS were migrants of which 65 percent were women (UNFPA 2006).

5. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

As the data above clearly suggests that the majority of the exploitation that women risk and face can be curtailed by rigorous application and ratification of the various international treaties that

countries have signed but no ratified. In no way is it implied that the risks are simply eradicated since the existence of religion-based dogma and traditional family setup in most of the developing countries enforce extra legal consequences on women if they try to exercise they agency and independence. But as the opportunities created by migration showcases, the ability of women to earn and provide for their families and the expectations that are attached to them are making them more independent if only very slowly.

Research already suggests that over the world women are considered to be more reliable than men with respect to their responsibilities towards their families and skills and experiences that they gain which they otherwise would never be exposed to are all factors that suggest that migration is a driver for empowerment of men both psychologically, educationally and economically. Migration in women not only make them financially independent but it has also proved to increase education in children, especially girls. They have also shown an inclination towards investment in human capital and health infrastructure as well as pushing towards a more gender equitable society.

Policy changes and their enforcement can effectively negate the exploitation that women face but even in the current scenario, migration in women can se seen as having an overall positive and gender inclusive and equitable affect even in the conventional restrictive societies of the world. Following are some suggestions that can minimise the risk migrant women face and maximise their participation in the global work force.

6. SUGGESTIONS

- Ensuring that migrant women get full and free institutional access to services and resources for basic human rights especially with respect to health care and reproductive services along with legal and police assistance irrespective of their status.
- There should be better access to financial institutions for ease of transfer of remittances.
- Create and enforce policies which ensure non-discrimination in labour markets and other sectors, thereby increasing and providing women with better and equal opportunities.
- Provide the migrants with institutional support prior to, during and post migration so that they are well informed and have better access to services in protection of their rights.

- Offer and encourage, training, education and awareness programs in communities and societies that do not have access to such services and information.
- Monitor and regulate immigration officers and recruitment agencies.
- Increase public awareness of the benefits of migration in both the country of origin and destination.
- Provide free and reliable access to services through embassies and consular agents.

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